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THE REIGN OF RED INK¹

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I have given this paper on theme-correcting in the grades a nickname, "The Reign of Red Ink," in order to characterize, or caricaturize—if I may coin a word—the present period of composition teaching. As accurately as I can judge from a rather brief experience and limited observation, I believe that the children in the grades live, so far as composition work is concerned, in an absolute monarchy, in which they are the subjects, the teacher the king (more often, the queen), and the red-ink pen the royal scepter. Or—"not to crack the wind of the poor phrase, running it thus"—I believe that in the elementary school we correct pupils' themes too rigidly.

No one who has studied the history of the teaching of English can doubt that the children of today are receiving better training in writing than public-school children have hitherto received. The teachers themselves have generally been subjected to thorough and sensible drill; the psychology and pedagogy of the subject have been zealously studied and suggestively written; and composition work, along with other phases of English, is accorded an important place in the curriculum. But despite all this, theme correcting is an unintelligent process.

I said "despite all this"; perhaps "because of this" would be at once more accurate and more suggestive. For I believe that a good deal of the blame can be charged to our natural, and even commendable, eagerness to justify the promotion of English to the highest position in the school course. We are over-anxious to figure the profits, to see and to show results. In our efforts to train our children, we turn martinets and discipline the recruits into a company of stupid, stolid soldierkins—prompt to obey orders, it

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may be, but utterly devoid of initiative. Or, to turn the figure, our "vaulting ambition," like Macbeth's, "o'erleaps itself."

But if an excess of zeal were the only source of the stream of red ink, we could easily dam the current by simply damning the springs. This is not the only source, by any means.

Let us assume that the average grade teacher is conscientious, industrious, well educated, and experienced. She may yet fail as a teacher of composition, or come short of perfect success, for three reasons: she may not rightly conceive the purpose of composition work; she may not fully understand children; she may have false standards of written English in the grades—all of which inevitably lead to unintelligent criticism. In fact, as I hope to show, these are the three most fruitful sources of the rigid and stupid theme-correcting we practice nowadays.

Well, what are the purposes of composition work? They are four: to deepen impression and afford means of expression, to train in thinking, to train in talking, and to train in writing. From the standpoint of the teacher there is, perhaps, a fifth: to furnish educative seat-work. Most of us tacitly assume that the principal, even the only, aim of composition writing is to train in writing. Not so—very few of us need to write much. The vast majority of people write nothing except letters, and not many of them. They must have training for that, of course; but if that be the sole, or even the chief, product of the complicated machinery now installed in our public schools, then most assuredly the mechanical friction is largely in excess of the net work-power.

No, the most important educative value of composition work is not the mere training in writing. It is the training in thinking and talking. And that teacher whose eyes are focused on the writing value is almost invariably a weak teacher of composition work and a short-sighted critic of themes. She is the teacher who pounces on the verbal mistake, who ferrets out the buried grammatical blunder, who scents from afar a colloquialism or a bit of slang—the teacher, in short, who, neglecting the broader aspects of the work, directs her eyes always to the details. The most successful teacher of composition is the one who pays most heed to the thought-processes of her pupils, who emphasizes organizations of

material, unity of paragraph and theme, and other cardinal phases of thinking; for she well knows that good thinking is pretty sure to produce good expression. The criticism of such a teacher is constructive; it takes such form as: "Do you need this sentence to make your thought clear?" "Hadn't you better transpose these two paragraphs?" "Aren't you off the subject at this point?" Of course, the details are to be considered—considered as details, however, not as fundamentals.

Let me be understood. I know that the conventions of writing must be taught—punctuating, and spelling, and paragraphing, and all the rest—seven of them, I believe. And I know that the only way to teach these forms is drill. Down in the oil fields of West Virginia we know what that term means. The drillers must send the steel down through hundreds of feet of earth and sand and rock, day and night, lifting the bit with machine-like regularity and sending it down, up and down, up and down, without hurry and without halt—drilling, drilling, drilling. I know we must drill. But I insist that that is *not* the most important phase of composition work; that the teacher who dashes red ink all over the page in correcting forms and conventions is *not* the best teacher of composition writing.

So much for the first of the three primary causes of unintelligent criticism. The second is that the average teacher does not understand the nature of the average child, especially if that teacher is a woman and that child a boy. I know that most of us have read books on children; but we neglect the one way in which an adult may comprehend the nature of a child: by retracing in memory the path that has led us from childhood to maturity. It is a devious path, a veritable maze—making wide detours here, almost obliterated there. But the backward journey can be made, and a fascinating journey it is indeed. We can make it by observing children sympathetically and reminiscently, by groping back in our lives for lost feelings and experiences, thus reconstructing ourselves anew—as the gentle Elia summons before his forty-five-year-old mind the image of himself as a boy; as Stevenson resurrects his past and incarnates the memories of his youth in an imaginary younger brother. According to her abilities, that is what every

teacher must do. No person can teach children who does not love them, love them intelligently and understandingly, who cannot interpret them by the recollections of her own childhood.

Many of us, in spite of the sound modern theories of child nature, still believe that a boy is a little man, a girl a young woman. It's false. With what young ardor did I despise a certain bland, unctuous minister who used to pat me on the head and call me his nice little man! I am reminded of the remark some historian made about the Holy Roman Empire: It wasn't holy, it wasn't Roman, it wasn't an empire. I wasn't *his*, I wasn't *nice*, I wasn't a *little man*. When shall we learn that we ruin the individual by forcing him into maturity before he has left childhood? When shall we learn that it is not our work to yank the boy and girl into manhood and womanhood? That Nature alone can perform the process *naturally*? That our sole duty is to ward off mischievous influences and to supply aliment for the healthy growth of mind and heart? When—but I'm waxing oratorical. Do you remember Mr. Scott-Gatty's poem of the "Three Little Pigs"?—those piggies who expired in the heroic and un-porcine effort to be old before their time?

A moral there is to this little song,

A moral that's easy to see:

Don't try while yet young to say, "Umph! umph! umph!"

For you only say, "Wee! wee!"

But to return to my subject. Our ignorance of child nature leads us into many errors in our methods of teaching the writing of English. One is that we often assign themes beyond the abilities of the child. This phase of the subject lies outside the boundaries of my paper; but I must state this obvious fact: the child will not make so many blunders, in thought or in expression, if the subject assigned is within his scope. I know we are more intelligent in this regard than we formerly were; but within the last few months I have noticed teachers assigning subjects the material for which must be gathered in reference books and encyclopedias. I do not mean that the writing of compositions should not sometimes lead the children into easy research work; I mean that the assignment should not force them to depend upon this, should not, so to speak, bring

them into the shoals of bookish information when they might be sailing the ocean of experience—or at least, the pond of experience. If then, we are desirous of lessening the number of red-ink hieroglyphics inscribed upon pupils' themes, let us take heed of our assignments. Let us, at any rate, not follow the prescription compounded by Lewis Carroll: to feed pepper to our little boy, "and beat him when he sneezes."

Our ignorance of child nature is responsible for much of the severity, even harshness, of our criticism of children's written work. Many grade teachers apply too closely the methods of the normal-school or college instructor in composition. They remember that, although they writhed under the mordant tongue of the professor of rhetoric, yet they saw the justice of his strictures, yet they extracted profit from his sarcasm. But they were men and women; their pupils are boys and girls. Children do not have balance and poise. They are a tangle of emotions, all more or less selfish. They are supersensitive to praise or blame, to encouragement or discouragement. They do not possess the will-power we adults have acquired; they haven't the interest which turns scathing rebuke to profit; they haven't the foresight to

Reach a hand thro' time, to catch
The far-off interest of tears,

as Tennyson says. I maintain that the harsh criticism of compositions one sometimes hears in the public school is a pedagogical crime.

I verily believe that the scolding, impatient manner in which many grade teachers correct their pupils' themes is largely responsible for much of the negative quality of the average grade composition. It is often a question of red ink versus red blood. The golden rule is: First impression, then expression; but not too much repression lest there be suppression. The artlessness, the spontaneity, which so often characterizes the writing of children, the robust humor, the extravagance of thought and phrase—all this is a natural expression of the child's nature, and should be handled with kindness and even admiration—as we manage a high-spirited horse. Of course, the child makes mistakes over and over; that's because he is a child. Of course his writing is juvenile, puerile,

infantile; that's because he's immature. I repeat: the boy is *not* a little man, the girl is *not* a young woman.

Through our ignorance of child nature we err in yet another respect in correcting themes: we take it for granted that *we* must correct every mistake. Sober thought will tell us that if we give the child an impulse, he will correct many of his own blunders. A glance back into our own past will show us that every person outgrows many childish errors. I am not recommending a *laissez-faire* policy; rather a *laissez-pour-faire* principle. I believe we shall do well to quit correcting so much and to begin suggesting and inspiring more.

My third contention is that many a teacher has false standards of written English in the grades, that she sets up false language idols, and that she compels her children to worship these. Let me mention two of these false standards.

The first is that the highest qualities of written English in the grades are correctness and elegance. This is the hiding-hole of the "grammar" bugaboo. Is an expression ungrammatical? No matter how firmly planted in the vernacular—is it ungrammatical? Drown it in red ink. Here lurks the "slang" incubus. Is it slang? No matter how effective, how striking, how natural—is it slang? Stab it to the heart with the red-ink pen. Is it a colloquialism, an undignified idiom? Out with the red-ink sword and strike off its head. "We must have correct, elegant English" forsooth—which every lover of the language will admit is often prim, stiff, prunes-and-prism-y English. The highest qualities of written English in the grades are naturalness and what we sometimes call suggestiveness, picturesqueness, vigor. If our criticism tends toward obtaining elegance and correctness at the expense of naturalness and virility, if the teacher roots up the healthy living language in order to obtain ground for raising posies, we had better turn our children out of school to learn their English on the streets.

Another false standard is the "literary" standard. The teacher sets up literary masterpieces, usually well selected, counsels her pupils to pattern after these, then criticizes accordingly. This would be excellent if the chief purpose in composition writing were to train authors. But it isn't. I am far from saying that we

should not correlate literature and writing: children can undoubtedly carry over from their reading to their writing many suggestions and principles. But the literary standard is not the proper standard for composition work in the grades. I believe the writing of children should resemble more nearly the language of good idiomatic speech. We hear a deal in these days about oral composition: I would have all composition work rather "oral" than literary. I know there is a vast difference between the English of good literature and the English of good talk, and I have no desire to confuse the two; I merely believe that grade pupils' compositions should be more like talk than literature. I would get rid of the stiffness, the formality, the absurd striving after literary effect, and the deliberate imitation of authors, which now characterize so much of the composition work in the grades. Most of them will write nothing but letters, and letter-writing should be taught; but most letters are not literary and should not be.

Is all this visionary? Is this all but an expression of youthful iconoclasm? I don't think so. It is one of the natural and inevitable manifestations of the modern tendency toward making the public school both a phase of child life and a preparation for adult life. The whole movement may seem to some a lowering of ideals; to me it seems the renunciation of the standards that we teachers naturally love, and enlistment under the standards which society has raised—and the public schools belong to society.

As I look back over what I have written, I see that in my endeavor to establish more practical principles of composition teaching and criticizing in the grades, I have given few definite suggestions for theme-correcting. All the rules needed, however, are easily derivable from the principles established. Let me state some of the most important. Most of them are trite; but they may have new significance as corollaries to the principles stated.

1. Use red ink sparingly at all times.
2. Avoid harsh criticism and sarcasm. A keen sense of humor is an asset in composition teaching; thank your lucky stars for it. But don't develop it at the expense of your pupils.
3. Praise more than you censure.
4. In general, avoid the conventional proof marks in correcting

themes. Insert the correct punctuation; write out the correct spelling; remodel a sentence that lacks unity.

5. Be catholic in your tastes. Don't force the children to write like one another—or like yourself. Don't use the red-ink pen to prune the young trees into uniformity.

6. See to it that your criticism is constructive rather than destructive.

7. Pay more attention to the fundamental elements of thinking than to the details of writing.

8. Emphasize naturalness and expressiveness rather than correctness and elegance.

9. Strive for the naturalness of talk rather than the formality of literature.

10. But drill unceasingly and patiently on the necessary writing conventions.

11. Watch carefully your assignments, that the subjects be within the grasp of your pupils.

12. Prevent probable mistakes by forewarning. To prevent, *go before*.

13. Have most of the composition work done at school. Watch the work and suggest and explain while the children are writing.

14. Occasionally return themes unmarked.

15. Occasionally let the pupils correct each other's themes. Try dividing your grade into couples for mutual advice in writing and criticizing.

In the beginning of this paper I said that the title, "The Reign of Red Ink," aptly describes the present period of composition teaching. I used the word *present* advisedly. I believe that the importance we justly attribute to composition work in the grades has, in these last few years, been leading us astray, and that soon we shall move back to a saner view of the nature and functions of this work. We shall not require less writing; we shall but more fully recognize the nature of the child, emphasize the more fundamental and practical aspects of the subject, and raise more intelligent standards of written English—we shall correct less. The reign of red ink is passing.